

## SOME VIEWS OF EXTENSION WORK IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

*C. M. Ferguson, Administrator, Federal Extension Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture*

We are about to ring down the curtain on the greatest century in technological progress. This century began with the founding of our system of land-grant colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture in 1862.

In this century we have seen farming in America change from the peasant agriculture of the old world to the professional agriculture of the new world. We have seen the sciences of agriculture and engineering combine to increase man's productivity threefold, with some evidence that the average farmer today could still double his efficiency if he were to adopt the scientific methods already being employed by our better farmers.

Most of this change has taken place in the last 15 years, and the rate continues to accelerate. The farm of 1977 will be a far cry from the farm of 1957.

Against this kind of a background we pause today to examine the general economic, social, cultural, and political climate in which we live. Against this backdrop we look at our great institutions which have spearheaded these many changes and ask ourselves the question: What is our role in helping people to understand what it is all about, to find facts, to distinguish between fact and opinion, to make decisions, to join with neighbors and friends and through organizations develop carefully considered courses of action?

### CAN AN EDUCATOR BE OBJECTIVE?

Paul Krause in his course in psychology for extension workers used to define education as "any influence which changes human behavior." He described this as change in knowledge (the things we know), skills (the things we do), and attitudes (the things we think).

I used this quotation in a speech a couple of years ago and received from one of my listeners a sharp rebuke. He contended that this concept envisioned some weird sort of brain-washing process. Unfortunately some people think that as educators we can never be truly objective—that we cannot avoid the role of the protagonist or the antagonist.

In my own opinion those who cannot be truly objective have no place in extension education. I realize that each of us may hold to

a private opinion, and may find times when we can express it appropriately, but we must be careful to identify it as a personal opinion and not necessarily a position of our institutions.

I realize that this is a delicate role to play—it requires great skill and ability. It is a role in which the advocate of any certain line of economic, social, or political thinking soon finds himself discounted in many circles. However, it is a role which, when played with objectivity and clarity, provides facts rather than opinions, teaches rather than indoctrinates, and can be a useful and satisfying role indeed. He who plays it well is destined to be a great leader.

At this point I would like to say that one of the best definitions of a leader is: “one who trains those who follow.” This is the challenge of educational leadership in the field of education in public affairs.

### **POLICY DETERMINATION NOT OUR ROLE**

Of course, what I have said is not new. You all recall the quote from the report of the postwar agricultural policy committee appointed by the Land-Grant College Association:

It is not the function of this committee, or of any other similar group, to determine what agricultural policies shall be adopted. That is the responsibility of the nation's citizens.

These are fundamental principles of educational work in public affairs to which Extension has scrupulously adhered. In fact the basic principle of adult education, as practiced by Extension, is to develop skills in decision making.

Again in the “Scope Report” of 1946 appear the following words:

From a functional standpoint this responsibility includes: (1) the diffusing of information, (2) the development of interest in and recognition of significant problems, (3) the encouragement of planning the best ways and means of solving the problems recognized, whether by individual or group action, and (4) stimulation of appropriate action by people themselves in accordance with the decisions they themselves have reached.

In 1948 the Joint Committee on Extension Programs, Policies, and Goals said:

The need which Extension must meet is primarily that of providing basic background information, pointing out why given economic problems have arisen, and what the alternative solutions might be. It is not Extension's function to provide pat answers or solutions. That is the prerogative of the people themselves.

These guideposts set the course but beyond the process of course setting rests the responsibility of getting the ship under way. Extension cannot shrug its shoulders to its educational responsibilities in a field just because the field is controversial or because the answer is not

a clear-cut "yes" or "no." Extension must at all times encourage and insist upon research which can provide facts.

We all realize research in this field is difficult. It often lacks the precision of statistical research or methods of long-proven value in the physical sciences. This does not relieve research workers of responsibility to explore the field and to try new techniques. The effectiveness of extension work will, to a great degree, depend on research support, not only in the fields of subject matter but in the fields of psychology, group dynamics, human relations, and in the processes of decision making.

I would like to have you look for a moment with me at some of the problems as seen from the administrator's corner. I am not thinking of my own corner alone but of the position of the state director or his assistant for programs, the district supervisor, the department chairman, or in many cases the dean or the president, and in the case of USDA, the Secretary or the Assistant Secretary.

No one has a quarrel with the objective of public affairs work—that of having a well informed citizenry. Yet some people feel very sincerely that a public-supported educational institution cannot be objective—that the public must glean its information from and form their opinions on what they hear and see on radio and television, read in news columns or editorials and that the individual must draw his own conclusions as to whether he has read fact or opinion and must measure the degree of bias.

I would fight for the right of every citizen, of every publication or organization to express its own views.

I would fight equally hard for the right of any institution of higher education to present, with the degree of objectivity becoming its educational status, subject matter on any public question, and to use such material in building an educational program designed to help people obtain and weigh facts and to make intelligent decisions. In fact, I would be critical of an institution which did not make provision for such an effort in its program of off-campus education.

True, great skill is required, and the job of training a staff to handle such situations is indeed a big one.

#### **PUBLIC AFFAIRS QUESTIONS INVOLVE ALL EXTENSION WORKERS**

Public affairs education is not the job of one or two individuals alone, although the responsibility for leadership must be centered in some one person. Public affairs, as the term infers, are something that should be of concern to every specialist and every agent. Education in

this area is not solely the job of the project leader who, working with his supervisor and agents, may set up a series of television broadcasts, radio talks, or county or community forums, or of the agent who at a farm organization meeting is called upon to discuss pros and cons of some current issue. This is just as much the job of the agent who holds an "across the desk" or an "over the feed lot fence" conference with a local news writer, a farmer, a county commissioner, a housewife, a local merchant, a minister, a banker, or a teacher.

The effective leader in this field is one who is able to create the feeling among his colleagues that every staff member has a stake in public affairs education and a responsibility to master the art of being objective. The staff member who climbs upon a pedestal and strikes the pose of a Socrates or a Plato is likely to find life lonely, indeed, as the public finds more satisfaction in a warm informal setting where a little whittling goes along with some good constructive thinking.

Nowhere in the extension carburetor do we find more use for the right mixture of facts, psychology, and human relations.

No program in this field can succeed without public acceptance. The ability to be understood is the key to acceptance.

Let us not underestimate the great contribution we can make in helping farm organizations, civic clubs, public affairs institutes, PTA's, and church groups develop their own efforts in this direction. They, too, need the assistance of trained leadership in locating resources and in understanding group psychology.

#### **LOCAL ISSUES MERIT ATTENTION**

Let us also avoid the danger that goes with either the concept that public affairs education is a blanket which covers the universe of economics and sociology or the idea that it encompasses only matters of national agricultural policy, important as this is and will continue to be.

Educational work in this field may be just as important when the question under discussion is a county road system, a local hospital, or a new facility at the fair grounds. In fact the experience of a group in handling local issues may be the "undergraduate" training needed to prepare them for a "graduate school" problem of more complex dimensions.

While the importance of identifying problems should not be minimized, there remains a further task in light of today's emphasis on program projection. The specialist must be alert to the needs of county program projection committees. These local people are blazing a

trail for Extension to follow. They are bringing to bear appropriate information. This they are sorting, weighing, and classifying.

Out of this process are emerging in clearer focus the problems upon which they want help, and many of these problems are going to fall in the general area of public affairs. Public policy which is developed will have much to do with their solution. If program projection, program building, or program development committees (call them what you may) have the facts regarding their resources—natural, human, economic, institutional, or organizational—and if they can see with some degree of clarity the potential which is theirs, they will find an area within the extension program where public affairs will be given its proper place and its right setting.

And so the administrator must find ways and means of recruiting and training a capable staff to do this job—staff members who in turn can develop a real team concept, maintain good public relations, see that facts are made available, teach the techniques of group dynamics and of effective communication, and become leaders not by edict or administrative decree but by skill, tact, and ability.

In closing I want to express my very deep appreciation to the Farm Foundation for their support of extension work in this field. Without it progress would have been slow indeed. I want to express to you who have taken leadership in this field my sincere thanks for your fine professional attitude and skillful handling of situations that were not always easy. May I encourage you in your efforts to have this very important effort thoroughly understood by your associates, by your administration, but particularly by your many publics.